The Effect of Affirmative Action Bans on the College Enrollment of Underrepresented Minority Students

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Ten states banned affirmative action (AA) at public universities prior to the 2023 *SFFA v. Harvard* Supreme Court ruling that prohibited race-based preferences in US college admissions. This brief summarizes the short- and medium-term effects of AA bans on flagship public universities' freshman racial composition. Bans cause immediate 20-50 percent declines in Black and Hispanic (URM) enrollment shares at only very-selective universities, though some regain 10-20 percentage points of their URM enrollment share within three years. AA bans do not systematically reduce Black more than Hispanic enrollment, and only UC Berkeley saw disproportionate declines among one gender (women). Declines in URM enrollment are generally (but not always) proportional to selectivity. The brief concludes by discussing recent data releases following the *SFFA* decision.[1]

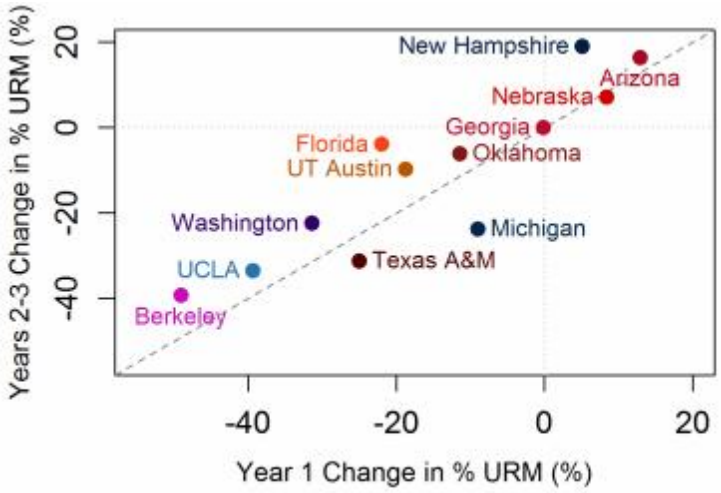
Universities have used race-based admissions preferences since the late 1960s (Urofsky, 2020). While affirmative action (AA) was once used to increase enrollment among some Asian populations – e.g. UC Berkeley targeted Filipino students until 1988 – in recent decades universities have generally provided admission preferences to Black, Hispanic, and Native American applicants. I refer to these students collectively as underrepresented minorities (URM).

AA bans have been imposed by both court decisions and ballot measures. All pre-2023 bans were statewide and affected only public universities. Universities maintain substantial leeway in which students they choose to admit following AA bans, and many have subsequently implemented alternative race-neutral policies in order to preserve undergraduate racial diversity. Bleemer (2023)

[1]All analysis uses publicly-available federal data from IPEDS. Contact the author for a replication package.

Email: bleemer@princeton.edu. This brief is an excerpt from the appendix ofBleemer and Jaynes (2025)'s forthcoming study of affirmative action and racial integration. Remaining errors are my own.

Figure 1: *The Immediate and Medium-Run Enrollment Effect of Affirmative Action Bans*



Note: The percent change in the average URM enrollment share of first-time full-time freshman students at flagship public universities in the first year and 2-3 years following their respective state's AA ban, relative to the same average URM share 1-2 years before the ban's implementation. URM includes Black, Hispanic, and Native American students. The AA bans were implemented in 1997 (TX), 1998 (CA), 1999 (WA), 2001 (FL), 2002 (UGA; there was no further statewide ban), 2008 (MI), 2009 (NE), 2011 (AZ), 2012 (NH), and 2014 (OK) (Kahlenberg and Potter, 2014). Idaho's 2020 AA ban was implemented too recently to measure its effect. Source: IPEDS.

surveys these policies and estimates their effects, showing that top percent policies (like Texas Top Ten) and holistic review – but not targeted high school outreach or SAT-optional policies – meaningfully increase URM enrollment, though not to the same degree as race-based preferences.[1]

Some – but not all – flagship public universities in states that have imposed AA bans have seen declines in URM enrollment. The effect of AA bans on the racial composition of all but the state's most selective universities is generally negligible due to the cascade effect.[2] Figure 1 shows the immediate and medium-run effect of AA bans on the URM share of undergraduates at public flagships in the states that have implemented AA bans. For example, the share of freshman students at Berkeley who were Black, Hispanic, or Native American fell from 21.5 percent in 1996-1997 to 10.9 percent in 1998, a decline of about 50 percent.[3] The largest proportional URM enrollment declines in the first year following their state's AA bans occurred at Berkeley, UCLA, and the University of Washington, with respective declines of approximately 50, 40, and 30 percent.[4] Several institutions saw declines between 10 and 25 percent, while a number of other institutions saw no effect on URM enrollment, or even small positive effects likely generated by

[1]About one-third of the University of California's URM enrollment decline following that state's AA ban resulted from changes in URM students' application behavior, not university admissions decisions (Bleemer, 2023).

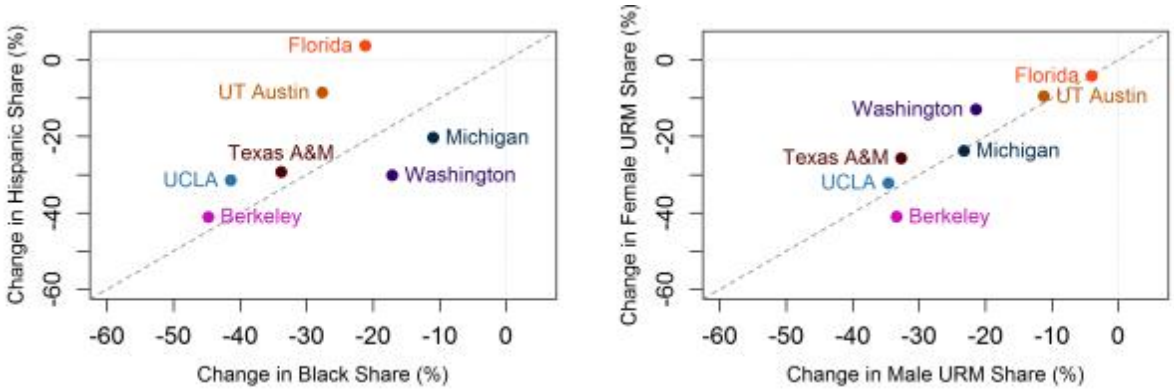
[2]URM students excluded from the most selective universities 'cascade' to enrollment at universities one selectivity tier down, causing URM enrollment gains that offset those universities' losses following their own cessation of race-based preferences (Conrad and Sharpe, 1996; Bleemer, 2022). Black and Hispanic enrollment tends to slightly rise at less- and non-selective institutions. AA bans also cause declines in URM enrollment at graduate schools (Ly et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2024).

[3]Bleemer (2022) shows that AA bans lead many applicants to not report their ethnicity on their application, though nearly all such students are non-URM.

[4]Arcidiacono et al. (2022) use Harvard University admissions data to simulate a 55 percent decline in URM enrollment share absent AA. Harvard's actual enrollment composition this year is presently unavailable.

Figure 2: *The Enrollment Effect of Affirmative Action Bans by Gender and Ethnicity*

(a) *By Ethnicity* **(b)** *By Gender*



Note: The percent change in the average URM enrollment share of first-time full-time freshman students at flagship public universities in years 1-3 following their respective state's AA ban among men and women and among Black and Hispanic students, relative to the respective average URM share 1-2 years before the ban's implementation. URM includes Black, Hispanic, and Native American students; separate estimates for Native American students are omitted due to small samples. See Figure 1 for each state's year of ban implementation. Source: IPEDS.

spurious variation or state-wide demographic change.

Most universities 'rebounded' from their initial URM enrollment declines in subsequent years. Many of the institutions that recovered the largest shares of their post-ban URM enrollment decline implemented explicit race-neutral alternatives to AA: top percent policies (Texas and Florida) and holistic review (Berkeley).[5] The University of Michigan did not exhaust its legal appeals of the state's AA ban until three years after its initial implementation, during which time the university's URM enrollment share steadily declined. Only Florida regained at least half of its first-year decline in URM enrollment share in the subsequent two years, and URM enrollment at the most-impacted universities hardly recovered further in the subsequent decades (see Long and Bateman, 2020).

Figure 2 shows the effect of AA bans on flagship public universities' URM enrollment share by gender and specific ethnicity, focusing on the seven universities where bans led to sizable URM enrollment declines. While AA often provides larger admissions advantages to Black than Hispanic applicants (Bleemer, 2022), only two universities – UT Austin and Florida – saw substantially larger declines in Black than Hispanic enrollment following their AA bans.[6] Michigan and Washington saw larger declines in Hispanic than Black enrollment. Affirmative action bans generally have similar effects on male and female enrollments, though Berkeley's female URM share declined by almost 10 percentage points more than its male URM share.[7]

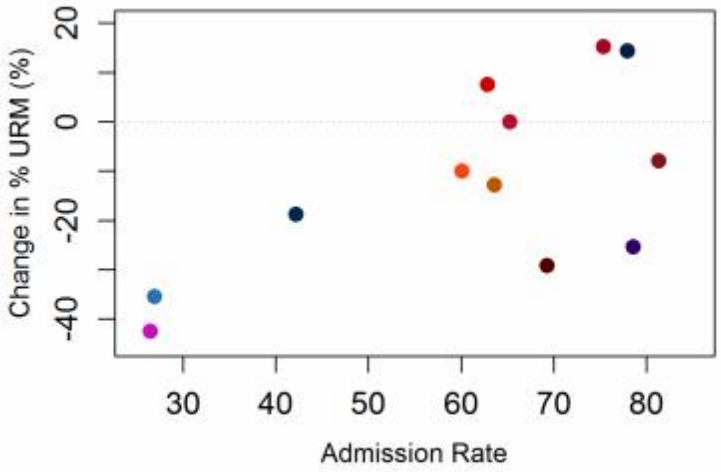
Figure 3 shows the relationship between each university's selectivity and the impact of an AA ban on the university's URM share. There is generally a negative relationship: more-selective universities see larger URM enrollment declines following AA bans, likely because those universities required larger race-based admissions preferences to overcome their stronger admission preference

[5] Berkeley's rebound may have partially resulted from legal pressure from a February 1999 class-action lawsuit filed by the NAACP (Schoenfeld, 2004) leading to changes in the relative weight placed on each component of students' applications (Antonovics and Backes, 2014).

[6] Bleemer (2022) shows that white and Asian enrollments proportionally increased following California's AA ban.

[7]Antman et al. (2024) document some evidence of disproportionate effects of AA bans on female students.

Figure 3: *The Enrollment Effect of Affirmative Action Bans by Selectivity*



Note: The percent change in the average URM enrollment share of first-time full-time freshman students at flagship public universities in years 1-3 following their respective state's AA ban plotted against the university's admission rate, relative to the same average URM share 1-2 years before the ban's implementation. Admission rates are the overall share of freshman applicants who are admitted and are measured in the year that the ban was implemented. Admission rates are unavailable prior to 2001; earlier years' rates are replaced by the 2001 rate. URM includes Black, Hispanic, and Native American students. See Figure 1 for each state's year of ban implementation. Source: IPEDS.

for applicants with high measured academic preparation (since URM students are increasingly underrepresented at higher levels of academic performance). The two outliers to this trend – Texas A&M and the University of Washington – have high overall admissions rates but much lower rates in specific STEM- and engineering-oriented fields, suggesting that AA bans led many students to enroll in those disciplines elsewhere.

Only a few institutions have released statistics on the change in their freshman URM share in the first year following the *SFFA* decision. Two highly-selective small private institutions, MIT (5% admission rate) and Amherst College (9%), saw first-year URM enrollment share declines of about 40 and 56 percent, respectively, the latter seeing a much larger decline among Black students. The University of Virginia (16%), on the other hand, saw no change in its URM enrollment share. The findings presented above contextualize these and other soon-to-be-released statistics and highlight those which diverge from past experience.

For more information about the short- and long-term effects of affirmative action bans, see the following two related UC-CHP policy briefs:

- "Proposition 209 and Affirmative Action at the University of California" provides a concise summary of the long-run effects of Proposition 209 – which banned affirmative action at California public universities in 1998 – for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and white Californians (Bleemer, 2020a).
- "Mismatch at the University of California before Proposition 209" summarizes the empirical evidence for and against the "mismatch hypothesis", which holds that affirmative action causes average educational and labor market *deterioration* among URM students, and argues that available evidence strongly rejects that hypothesis (Bleemer, 2020b).

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